

# Chapter 1

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## *Introduction: The Good Suburb*

*Creating accessible commercial centers from both local and arterial streets, placing an emphasis on the needs of pedestrians, and integrating retail with civic and transit uses would represent a considerable change from the current norm. These are clearly the most challenging transformations... and ones that will take time, experimentation, and evolution.*

-- Peter Calthorpe<sup>1</sup>

## The Good Suburb: A Theory

*Omnis civitas corpus est.*<sup>2</sup> Every city is a living body. A suburban city, or city as suburb, is no exception. As such, it has needs like any organic creature--to feed, to grow, to dispose of waste, and ultimately to flourish. In American metropolitan areas of the postwar era, it apparently also has the need to reproduce, spawning suburban forms like a den of overachieving rabbits; and then perhaps even to die (though this is a feature seldom hoped for).

The good suburb strives to be the sustainable suburb. That is, it works to ensure the equitable preservation of built and natural environments, cultural heritages, and economic opportunities for all citizens. As part of a larger region, it does not deplete the varied environmental, economic, and social resources from the surrounding region without a mechanism for replenishing them, just as species do not deplete the resources of their habitats without risk of death or the ability to move on (which is, in a way, what suburban sprawl may be).



**Suisun City, California, suburban downtown redevelopment.**

S. Buntin.

Whether “good” or not, all suburbs share a dynamic relationship with the central city or cities and other suburbs to form the metropolitan region. The physical, economic, and social “shape” of suburbs, then, affect and are affected by the shapes of the central city and other suburbs--as well as the people who live and work

within them and the surrounding landscapes.

Historically, central cities has played the primary role as dominant employment and cultural centers of regions. As suburbs continue to grow, however, the monocentric makeup of many regions has changed to a polycentric one, with suburbs themselves becoming central employment and cultural locations. The relationships among cities within regions, then, become more integrated and complex: suburbs do not exist as singular entities, and in working toward a sustainable future cannot act as such.

Yet the good suburb retains its own organic nature--its own community identity--in a regional context by integrating a variety of environmental (built and natural), economic, and social factors, providing options for citizens at all socioeconomic levels. The primary way in which the good suburb manifests itself is through land use, or urban form. How a suburb is laid out, whether through a master plan or in a less organized manner, determines everything from protection of and integration with the natural landscape to commuting patterns, citizen diversity to economic stability.

Primarily, the good suburb is pedestrian-oriented. It does not discriminate against the citizen who does not have access to an automobile. That is not to say that the good suburb cannot accommodate the automobile--indeed, it must if it is to be successful

in today's world--but it places a higher priority on the safe and enjoyable movement of people on foot (so to speak) or through mass transit. The shapes of buildings, walkways, public spaces, landscaping, and all other features of the city and its structure are, then, oriented at eye-level. Such details make the suburb an enjoyable place to be, and are recognized through building facades, street furniture, sidewalk and building materials, diverse and usable public spaces (plazas, courtyards, parks, etc.), and vistas of natural areas and well-designed buildings.



**Tualatin Commons, Tualatin, Oregon, suburban city center redevelopment.** S. Buntin.

The good suburb has a downtown, or core--a central location symbolic, environmental, economic, and cultural. If large enough, it has other, subordinate core areas (often referred to as urban villages or neighborhood centers). These core areas are generally high-density compared to development on the periphery of the metropolitan edge, and oriented around public spaces, civic buildings, and a mix of uses including residential, commercial retail, commercial office, institutional, and perhaps even industrial. They thrive at many hours of the day, on weekends as well as weekdays, offering physical and cultural amenities which keep a critical mass of people who in turn allow businesses to thrive. The best of these are also integrated with the natural environment, so that the good suburb has indeed grown from and is a part of its natural heritage.

A wide variety of housing for all family types and incomes is provided throughout the good suburb, though will vary from one to another. It is densest around the urban core, but throughout the suburb always dense enough to make pedestrian access from housing to places of employment, shopping, recreation, and others a viable opportunity. Architecture--not only of housing, but of all buildings--is based in the history of the city, not mimicking but rather growing logically from the earliest settlements, as applicable. Regional architecture is then coupled with site design and infrastructure

placement that is in agreement with the natural landscape. It does not cut down hills, but uses them to create a unique setting. It does not go against the elements, but rather uses them to enhance resource efficiency and resident comfort.

Core centers, housing, and all parts of the good suburb are interconnected locally and regionally through safe, enjoyable, and usable transportation networks. Mass transit options such as light rail, trolleys, and buses are fundamental, and have priority over automobile use. These are coupled with pedestrian and bicycle paths, which themselves are integrated into a variety of natural and landscaped trails and greenspaces throughout the suburb and metropolitan area. Movement is therefore not restricted by user type, ability, or income.

Preservation of open space is of utmost importance, and is accomplished by first protecting the unique natural areas--wetlands, rock outcroppings, streams, etc.--and then by integrating infrastructure and buildings with the land (and water) so as to protect and utilize natural drainage patterns, climatic variations, forested areas, and other aspects of the natural landscape. The good suburb is ideally completely integrated into a regional open space system--



**Uptown District, San Diego, California, regional shopping store redevelopment.** S. Buntin.

natural and agricultural--to help prevent sprawl.

The good suburb and its structures, citizens, and systems emphasize resource efficiency. This means that both renewable and non-renewable energy are used wisely and efficiently through land use and building design, that non-renewable resources such as water are used efficiently and preserved, and that waste is reduced, reused, and recycled in a variety of environmentally, economically, and socially equitable manners.

The good suburb learns from its past. As such, it builds upon

the good parts of its and the region's development through historic preservation and adaptive reuse, ensuring initially that buildings and man-made places have aging-in-place ability. New growth does not compete with but rather complements existing buildings, and often new technologies that make citizen quality of life better and more efficient are integrated into historic sites. Citizens learn about the history of their suburb and therefore come to respect it, knowing that that is where community identity truly begins.

Overall, the good suburb is diverse. Its buildings and spaces--public and private--are diverse, just as the natural landscape from which it grows is diverse. Its people are diverse in culture, race, income, and profession. But the diversity of place allows them to interact and get along well, and also works toward mutual respect and safety. And economic opportunities are diverse, so that people with different education levels and work skills can participate at varying levels, even while educational opportunities are encouraged and abound.

Every suburb is a living body. Based on human scale, diversity, mutual respect, and a sense of place, the good suburb thrives as its own entity within the context of the metropolitan region.

## **Getting to Good: Redeveloping Suburban Downtowns for a Sustainable**

## Future

Most suburbs today are not representative of the good suburb. Their land use patterns are primarily that of sprawl: they are low-density, have segregated land uses, are automobile-oriented, and fail to protect the natural environment. But what can suburbs that want to pursue an economically, environmentally, and socially successful future do? Moreover, how do suburbs existing in a metropolitan climate enhance their own identity while at the same time fostering local and regional sustainability?

For a number of suburbs, the answer more and more is to redevelop their downtowns and city centers in ways that bring people back. Indeed, the solution lies in a redevelopment process that begins with acknowledgment of the need for redevelopment, grows from a common community vision, and then works in a public-private partnership to create new and revitalized uses for a sustainable future.

This thesis report asks, and answers, a number of questions about sustainable suburban downtown redevelopment: How and why aren't most suburbs sustainable today? What are the costs and causes of suburban sprawl? Who pays?

What is sustainability and sustainable redevelopment? How is sustainability measured in the community?

Why pursue suburban downtown redevelopment? How does it affect the regional context? What are some examples?

Based on answers to these questions, the report then evaluates two case studies in depth: Suisun City, California, downtown redevelopment; and the creation of Tualatin Commons in Tualatin, Oregon.

Additionally, a review is provided of the economic, environmental, social, and political lessons learned from the case studies.

Based on these and other examples of sustainable suburban redevelopment, a fourteen-step methodology is then proposed. The methodology is a

### Getting to Good...?

*The practical comes first: that land, energy, and resources would be saved, that traffic would be reduced, that homes would be more affordable, that children and elderly would have more access, that working people would not be burdened with long commutes. The social consequences are less quantitative, but perhaps equally compelling. They have to do with the quality of our shared world, our commons.*

**Peter Calthorpe**  
*The Pedestrian Pocket:  
New Strategies for Suburban  
Growth<sup>3</sup>*

comprehensive prescription for redeveloping suburban downtowns for a more sustainable future. It provides a flexible process for suburban political leaders and citizens as they undertake large-scale downtown revitalization and redevelopment efforts.

The report then discusses the barriers to redevelopment, recognizing that the lessons of Suisun City and Tualatin can help suburban communities across America overcome barriers they face in their own large-scale downtown redevelopment efforts.

Ultimately, the report concludes that suburban downtown redevelopment is essential for communities seeking a sustainable future, especially in a regional context. While “getting to good” poses considerable challenges, the rewards are well worth the efforts.

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## Endnotes and References

1. Calthorpe, Peter. 1993. *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community, and the American Dream*. Princeton Architectural Press: New York. Pg. 53.
2. St. Augustine. *City of God*.
3. Calthorpe, Peter. 1992. "The Pedestrian Pocket: New Strategies for Suburban Growth," in Walter, Bob, Arkin, Lois, and Crenshaw, Richard, Editors. *Sustainable Cities: Concepts and Strategies for Eco-City Development*. Eco-Home Media: Los Angeles. Pg. 34.